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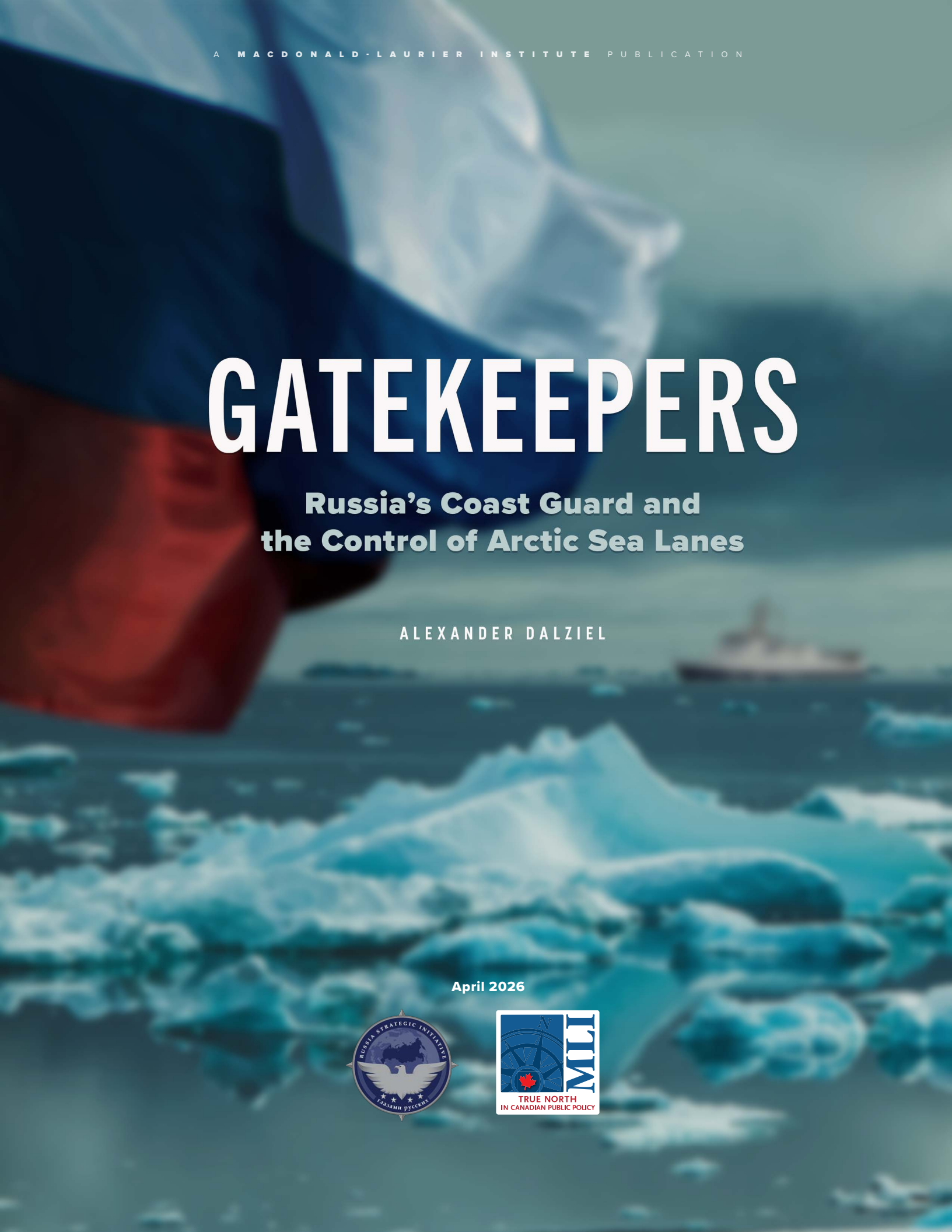

GATEKEEPERS

Russia's Coast Guard and the Control of Arctic Sea Lanes

ALEXANDER DALZIEL

April 2026

Contents

The author's understanding of coast guard issues benefited greatly from timely conferences held the North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) and the Canadian Maritime Security Network (CMSN) in fall 2025.

The author dedicates this paper to his father, who has inspired a life-long interest in matters maritime.

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Executive summary | *sommaire*

Coast guards are essential to all Arctic countries. Whether it is security patrols, law enforcement, search and rescue or supplying remote communities, countries adapt their coast guards to fill the many roles that the Arctic's unique and challenging conditions and characteristics demand. Russia is positioning itself to be the world's gateway to Arctic waters. The Russian Coast Guard (RCG) is one element in the Kremlin's strategy to shape the region's future.

The RCG is being modernized with ice-capable ships to advance two of the most important dimensions of Russia's Arctic grand strategy: locking down the Russian exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Arctic, and dictating who can use the Northern Sea Route (NSR) shipping lane that runs through it from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea. In this agenda, the RCG is a low-profile but high-value asset. Primarily a border security police force, it is part of one of Russia's most powerful ministries, the Federal Security Service (FSB). While not a military agency, it has a military-like culture – and low-end military capabilities.

Russia is prepping the RCG's crews – known as maritime border guards – to aid in this mission in the "grey zones" of international law. Official publications tell them that they are ensuring Russia's border and economic security in a hostile world of Western states looking to encroach on Russia's "rights" in the Arctic. To that end, Russia is priming the RCG fleet to work in icy seas and conduct high-intensity "law enforcement" actions. These actions will enable the FSB Border Service spetsnaz – Russian high-end police and special forces – to fight terrorism and sabotage. These same capabilities, however, set the RCG up to be a "hybrid warfare" tool that can advance Russian goals in the sea lanes of the Arctic below the threshold of open conflict.

China has been a pioneer of aggressive hybrid zone warfare in the contested waters of the western Pacific Ocean. Its Coast Guard has become the RCG's main international partner since 2022. They signed a co-operation agreement in 2023 and sailed together in Russia's eastern Arctic waters in 2024, illustrating that Russia is willing to indulge an armed Chinese state presence in the region.

The approaches to the NSR and Russia's Arctic EEZ in the Arctic, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans are also strategic zones for Canada, the United States and NATO. Off NATO-ally Norway, the Barents Sea is Russia's access lane to the North Atlantic and nearby is the Kola Peninsula, which hosts a large portion of Russia's nuclear arsenal. At the other end of the Arctic, the Bering Strait is where China, Russia, and the United States meet – and is a crucial passageway connecting west-coast ports to the western Canadian Arctic. The RCG will be active at these intersections – making it a factor in the maritime security considerations of Canada, the United States, NATO and North Pacific partners like South Korea and Japan. **MLI**

Les gardes-côtes sont essentiels pour tous les pays arctiques. *Qu'il s'agisse de patrouilles de sécurité, d'application de la loi, de recherche et sauvetage ou d'approvisionnement des communautés éloignées, les pays adaptent leurs gardes-côtes pour remplir les nombreux rôles que les conditions et caractéristiques uniques et difficiles de l'Arctique exigent. La Russie se positionne pour être la porte d'entrée mondiale des eaux arctiques. La Garde côtière russe (RCG) est un élément de la stratégie du Kremlin pour façonner l'avenir de la région.*

La GCR modernise sa flotte en acquérant des navires capables de se déplacer en eaux glacées, afin d'appuyer deux aspects clés de la grande stratégie arctique de la Russie : le bouclage de la zone économique exclusive russe dans l'Arctique et le contrôle de l'accès à la route qui la traverse, du détroit de Béring jusqu'à la mer de Barents. Dans ce contexte, si le rôle de la GCR est peu voyant, il est tout de même de grande valeur. Avant tout une force de police frontalière, la GCR est subordonnée au puissant Service fédéral de sécurité (FSB). Il ne s'agit pas d'une organisation militaire, mais elle possède une culture – et des capacités de base sur ce plan.

La Russie prépare les équipages de la GCR – les garde-frontières maritimes – pour les « zones grises » du droit international. Selon les publications officielles, ils assurent la sécurité frontalière et économique de la Russie dans un monde inhospitalier, les États occidentaux cherchant à empiéter sur les « droits » russes dans l'Arctique. Ce serait pourquoi la Russie enligne cette flotte pour des missions dans les eaux glacées et des opérations de « maintien de l'ordre » à grande échelle. Ces opérations habiliteront les spetsnaz – unités d'élite des forces spéciales russes – du Service des frontières du FSB à combattre le terrorisme et le sabotage. Ces mêmes capacités feront toutefois de la GCR un instrument de «guerre hybride» destiné à atteindre les objectifs russes dans l'Arctique sans déclencher de conflit ouvert.

La Chine a été à l'avant-garde de la guerre d'agression hybride dans les zones contestées de l'océan Pacifique occidental. Sa garde côtière est devenue le principal

partenaire international de la GCR en 2022. Les deux pays ont cosigné un accord de coopération en 2023 et ont navigué ensemble dans les eaux de l'Arctique oriental russe en 2024, ce qui démontre que la Russie est disposée à tolérer une présence étatique chinoise armée dans la région.

Les approches de la route maritime du Nord et de la zone économique exclusive russe dans les océans Arctique, Pacifique et Atlantique représentent également des zones stratégiques importantes pour le Canada, les États-Unis et l'OTAN. Au large de la Norvège, membre de l'OTAN, la mer de Barents représente pour la Russie un corridor vers l'Atlantique Nord; à sa proximité immédiate se situe la péninsule de Kola, qui abrite une partie importante de son arsenal nucléaire. À l'extrémité opposée, le détroit de Béring constitue un point de convergence géopolitique entre la Chine, la Russie et les États-Unis – également un passage crucial reliant les ports de la côte ouest à l'Arctique occidental canadien. La GCR sera présente à ces intersections – et sera un élément à considérer dans le cadre des enjeux liés à la sécurité maritime du Canada, des États-Unis, de l'OTAN et des partenaires dans le Pacifique Nord, notamment la Corée du Sud et le Japon. **MLI**

Introduction

The waters of the Arctic hold a central place in Russia's grand strategy. Russia has ambitious goals to control access to those waters. While the nuclear icebreakers of the state-owned company Rosatom and the nuclear submarines of the navy are its most potent forces in the Arctic, the Russian Coast Guard (RCG) has a distinct role in advancing Russia's geopolitical goals.

The RCG's geopolitical work concentrates at each end of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the sea lane that lies in the waters of Russia's territorial sea and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and that runs from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea. Russia wants to make itself the preferred gateway to the Arctic, and it is positioning the RCG to be the gatekeeper where the NSR meets the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It aims to control who enters the NSR. That goal sits uncomfortably with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), to which Russia is a signatory, primarily because it defies UNCLOS's interpretation of EEZs as international waters, through which any country can navigate. A key task of the RCG is to advance Russia's agenda by attempting to exert national law enforcement in these waters.

Accordingly, Russia's leaders are telling RCG crews that protecting the NSR is one of their defining tasks because in doing so they are advancing Russia's national, border, and economic security. It is messaging that indicates that the leadership is positioning the RCG to provide high-end law enforcement and low-end naval functions through coercive means, enabling it to police "grey zones" in the Arctic in a hostile global environment. These grey zones are areas of contested legal status where countries try to accomplish their goals through aggressive means short of military conflict. In part, the RCG will fulfill its geopolitical mission through its presence, conducting standard coast guard duties like fisheries patrols and regulations enforcement. But its presence

– with crews ready and equipped to take armed action – is also designed to deter those who would pass through the region without seeking Russian approval. The RCG will focus its efforts on the eastern and western margins of its Arctic continental shelf, the bookends of the NSR. Thanks to Ukraine, the RCG's newest, most Arctic-capable Ermak series ships are badly off schedule. The RCG is aiming to build the potential amenable to conducting hybrid warfare, particularly in the islands and waters where the Arctic Ocean meets the North Pacific and the North Atlantic.

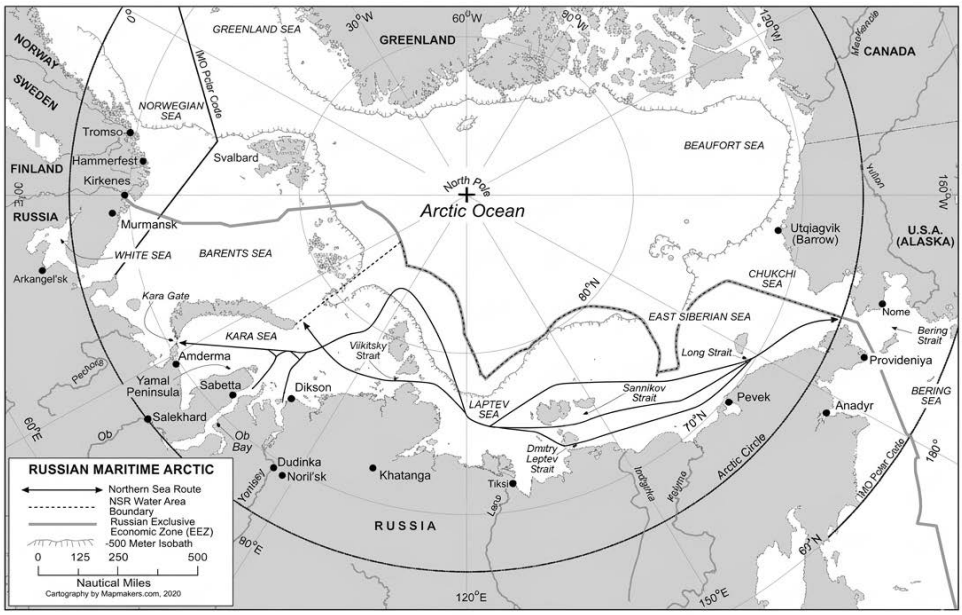
This paper is a case study that examines how a state uses its coast guard as a geopolitical tool. Its analysis draws on Russian-language sources and recent North American and European scholarship to examine the RCG's geopolitical role. And it sheds light on how the Federal Security Service (FSB), one of Russia's domestic political power brokers, is positioning itself in the Arctic through the RCG, which is a part of the FSB's Border Service.

RCG basics and history

Russia's Coast Guard (*Береговая охрана*) is a law enforcement agency whose mandate is border security. Its primary operational tasks are enforcing maritime boundaries, undertaking fisheries patrol and enforcement, protecting critical infrastructure, and countering crime and terrorism. The RCG is a department of the FSB Border Service (*Пограничная служба ФСБ России*), itself a part of the overall Federal Security Service (FSB - *ФСБ - Федеральная служба безопасности*), Russia's internal security service and the post-Soviet successor to the KGB.

Soviet legacies still influence the RCG's mission and culture. In the Soviet Union, the KGB handled border security and its maritime units were highly militarized, forming a "navy reserve." At that time, its fleet consisted of lightly modified navy vessels. After the Soviet Union declared a 200-mile EEZ in the late 1970s, the KGB maritime units assumed responsibility for protecting maritime natural resources and fisheries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the RCG transferred to the short-lived Federal Border Service. In turn, in 2003 the border security role, both on sea and land, became part of the FSB's mandate, and the RCG became a formal "department" of the FSB Border Service in 2007. In its early years as part of the FSB Border Service, the RCG demilitarized its personnel; by 2005, it no longer referred to them as border troops. Instead, it developed an identity as more of a law enforcement

MAP 1: Map of the Russian Arctic region



Source: Used with the permission of Lawson W. Brigham, University of Alaska Fairbanks

agency. Scholars contend that the RCG started remilitarizing in 2017 and that Soviet legacies remain apparent to this day (Elgsaas and Parnemo 2019). Contemporary maritime scholars and maritime security practitioners have noted the heavy focus of the RCG on law enforcement and national security (NAADSN 2025).

Russia's Grand Strategy and the maritime zones in the Arctic

National security is a preoccupation of the Russian government when it comes to the NSR, because it is pushing for national control of a region that by most interpretations are international waters. Russia's Merchant Shipping Code provides an official definition of the NSR. The code states that the route consists of "internal sea waters, the territorial sea, the contiguous zone and the exclusive economic zone" (Russian Federation 2025). Russian strategic documents describe the NSR as a national sea lane under the sovereignty of the Russian Federation. As US scholar Troy Bouffard puts it (2021), Russia's strategy is "to secure increased operational control of its maritime interests." That position puts great importance on the law enforcement aspect of Russia's attempts to control the NSR, giving the RCG a niche in which to operate. First

among the geopolitical functions of the RCG, then, is to establish the Russian state's ability to project and enforce power across the waters of the NSR.

However, Russia's national goals do not align with most interpretations of UNCLOS. Other countries, notably the United States, dispute two components of Russia's goals: free navigation through straits along the NSR and in the international waters of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Four components of international law are relevant here: internal waters, EEZs, territorial seas, and international straits. In most cases, internal waters consist of lakes, rivers, and tide waters, and fall completely under the legal prerogative of the coastal state. From the coast out to 12 nautical miles, these are territorial seas and fall under Russian national law. Even there, however, Russia has an obligation to allow other nations' ships "innocent passage" – i.e., travel through the territorial sea between points outside of the coastal state and not harmful to the coastal state's "peace, good order, or security." In addition, Russia claims a "contiguous zone," which adds another 12 nautical miles to its territorial sea. As a signatory to UNCLOS, Russia has recognized that in its exclusive economic zone, extending out to 200 nautical miles, it has jurisdiction only over the resources of the water column and seabed, resources such as fish and oil and gas. For ships, the EEZ's surface is international waters, and the nearest coast state has limited ability to police vessels there. Further, UNCLOS recognizes that there are international straits through which a coastal state must permit "transit passage" – i.e., travel from one part of the high seas or an EEZ to another, regardless of whether they are in territorial waters. (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy 2017).

Russia and the United States dispute the application of these concepts in the waters to Russia's north. Russia describes the Vilkitsky, Shokalsky, Sannikov, and Laptev Straits along the NSR as internal waters, whereas the United States sees them as international straits. Without getting into legal details, debates in the case of these waters involve interpreting UNCLOS's exception in Article 234 for "ice-covered waters" (United Nations 1982). This provision gives a coastal state the right to enforce "non-discriminatory laws and regulations" to prevent pollution in waters where ice is present for most of the year and where there are "particularly severe climatic conditions." This has a bearing on the interpretation of passage rights in international waters in the EEZ, territorial waters, and international straits, even should there be agreement on the character of these maritime zones. Bouffard, the American

scholar, has contended that "very little . . . can be argued as being representative of international norms" in the Russian claims, pointing out that "the NSR area claimed as internal waters (from the EEZ to the coast) is almost all water" (Bouffard 2021). The US explicitly disagrees with Russia's position. China, too, is likely sceptical of Russia's claims, given its view that Arctic "shipping routes, . . . are vital to the existence and development of all countries and humanity" and highlights its rights under UNCLOS in its 2018 Arctic White Paper. For now, however, Beijing is taking a pragmatic approach, preferring to extract concessions on other geopolitical issues rather than running roughshod over Moscow (Dalziel 2024 and 2025b).

The US position is at odds with Russia's grand strategy, which holds the NSR as one of its top priorities. Russian strategic documents and public statements by its leaders make this clear. The 2022 Maritime Doctrine has a clear goal of making Russia a leading maritime power and calls the Arctic a "vital interest," one of only three areas given that label (one of the others is the Arctic-relevant North Pacific waters of the Sea of Okhotsk) (Russian Federation 2022a). Russia's Foreign Policy Concept calls the Arctic a "national transportation artery" (Russian Federation 2023); the Arctic Development Plan emphasizes its international dimension, calling the NSR a "transport corridor of global significance" with Russia aiming to make it a national transport infrastructure competitive on international markets (Russian Federation 2020b). According to Russia's Transportation Strategy, the NSR will become a year-round shipping route for the export of natural resources and for international shipping by 2035 (Russian Federation 2021b; Dalziel 2025b). Russia sees the NSR as under national jurisdiction and as a sea lane that is internationally attractive – and therefore beneficial for Russia to control. It is thus a primary area for Russia's "information confrontation" with NATO (Voo and Singh 2025).

The Russian leadership portrays the NSR as under threat. To counter that threat, they contend that Russia must strengthen its state control *(государственность)* over the waterway (Russian Federation 2021a). According to the Maritime Doctrine, foreign states are making "efforts ... to weaken Russian control over the NSR," while the National Security Strategy (NSS) claims that countries are attempting to obstruct Russia's economic development in the Arctic. The Arctic is now a zone of "strategic competition," according to Russia, where national security threats are active. Particular maritime threats include

sabotage against infrastructure. Reducing these threats has been a priority for the country. One area Russia is addressing is "unresolved legal delimitation of maritime spaces in the Arctic" and it accuses unspecified others of revisionism in international law in the Arctic. An important part of answering those threats has been strengthening the combat capabilities of the FSB (i.e., the RCG) and the Navy Northern Fleet (Russian Federation 2021a; 2022a).

> *The Russian leadership portrays the Northern Sea Route as under threat. To counter that threat, Russia must strengthen its sovereignty.*

As indicated earlier, Russia's leadership sees a close connection between national security and the economic development of the Arctic, all heavily formulated around the NSR. As a transport artery, the NSR complements the Russian concept of a "strategic resource base" of natural resources, which forms the foundations of Russia's economic growth (Russian Federation 2020a; 2023; Dalziel 2025a). But access to those resources is the subject of a heightened international struggle, Russian documents assert, making their protection a national security priority. In this light, not only is the NSR a national security issue, but the Arctic continental shelf's resources also require protection as they are part of Russia's "sovereign rights" (Russian Federation 2021a). As the Transport Strategy summarizes, Russia's "Arctic Zone" is "one of the country's most important territories," a "priority of national security and of long-term economic growth" (Russian Federation 2021b).

This is the legal and strategic space in which the RCG functions as a tool in Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic ambitions in Arctic waters. "State control" through regulation of resource exploration and exploitation is part of the way Russia sees itself as protecting its national security (Russian Federation 2022a). Goals like optimizing border controls and collecting tolls for the use of the NSR (Russian Federation 2022b) implicate the RCG in performing supervisory and enforcement roles – as part of a geopolitical strategy that asserts jurisdiction in contested waters. Taking a step back to look at expert views on coast guards and geopolitics will help explain how those roles contribute to positioning Russia in the Arctic.

Coast guarding geopolitics

Coast guards are used worldwide for geopolitical purposes. In the context of coast guards, geopolitics here implies the competition between states for influence and power at sea. Russia is not alone in turning its coast guard to geopolitical ends. Its operations intertwine law enforcement, national security, and grand strategy (Bowers and Koh 2019; NAADSN 2025; Henderson 2025). More specifically, the policing and civilian functions that coast guards conduct have implications for asserting sovereignty and jurisdiction (Bueger 2025). They generally handle "low-intensity threats" on the law enforcement spectrum like countering smuggling or illegal fishing activities or matters of national security like counterterrorism. The civilian aspects of coast guard activity – search and rescue, environmental response, verifying regulatory compliance – can all have sovereignty-reinforcing implications and are therefore geopolitical implications, especially in disputed waters. Coast guards can be military or civilian agencies and the range of duties they handle varies across countries (Bowers and Koh 2019; Bueger 2025; Henderson 2025; Bueger and Edmunds 2024; Østhagen 2019).

The RCG is first and foremost a law enforcement agency. As the maritime security scholars Bueger and Edmunds (2024) put it, coast guards have "political and strategic logics that underpin their deployment and operations." These logics have geopolitical aspects, making coast guards components in a country's goals on the international stage. Coast guards fuse maritime security and geopolitics through strategic concepts like "sea control," "sea denial," and "power projection" (Bueger and Edmunds 2024; Choi 2019). Most significantly, maritime security experts identify coast guards as crucial to a state's "ability . . . to use the sea and to deny others its use" (Choi 2019). They are not designed to be warfighters like navies are, but alongside navies and other maritime agencies, they contribute to "sea control" and strategies of deterrence, reassurance, and contestation at different levels of intensity (Choi 2019; Bowers and Koh 2019). Coast guards are generally a part of a system of state agencies that carry out a country's objectives and responsibilities at sea.

In the case of the RCG, it is part of a multi-agency effort to advance Russia's Arctic strategy. A variety of players in Russia contribute to maritime security that the Kremlin can use as geopolitical instruments. The Russian navy (*Военный морской флот - ВМФ*, or VMF), Rosatomflot (managing the NSR and Russia's nuclear icebreakers), the Emergencies Ministry (handling

SAR duties), and others all have separate functions. Added to this are a host of state-run or state-connected enterprises, such as Sovkomflot, Russia's largest shipping company; Norilsk Nickel, one of the world's largest nickel mining firms; and Novatek, one of Russia's largest natural gas companies. These all have commercial fleets that contribute to Russia's geopolitical and geoeconomic goals. Then there is the Russian "shadow fleet" of oil and gas carriers. These have murky ownership structures that help Russia circumvent the sanctions that the international community has imposed upon it following Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Maritime Executive 2026).

The RCG in Russian strategy documents

As a part of the FSB and with cultural and structural affinities to the Russian navy, the RCG's role in this mix is as a high-end law enforcement agency with low-end naval capabilities. One of the legacies of its KGB past is the RCG's close relationship to the navy. While it is primarily a law enforcement agency, Russian terminology describes the RCG's personnel and functions as *военные*. The term usually connotes military service but here indicates an armed and military-like agency, outside of the reporting chains and formal structures of the Russian armed forces. Its closeness to the military is suggested in the fact that President Vladimir Putin approved its fleet recapitalization plan, the Strategy for the Development of the FSB Fleet to 2050, shortly after he signed off on the similarly named Strategy for the Development of the Russian Navy to 2050 (MNT 2025b).

The FSB leadership directs the RCG as a national security agency. Its influence is strong at the Maritime Collegium (*Морская коллегия Российской Федерации*). The Maritime Collegium, an interdepartmental coordination body that Putin created in 2024, is involved in overseeing all elements of maritime policy. It has a heavy FSB imprint and fine-tunes the geopolitical role of the RCG among the state agencies that Russia has at sea. Nikolay Patrushev is the current chairman of the Maritime Collegium - and a former head of the FSB (as was Putin, in the years before assuming the presidency). At the Maritime Collegium, the FSB participated fully in devising the RCG's fleet development strategy in consultation with other ministries, according to Patrushev (MNT 2025c).

Because of the prominence of the navy, Rosatom's nuclear icebreaker fleet and the FSB in Russian politics and media about the Arctic, the RCG is not as

visible in Russian strategy documents as these entities. In fact, Russian sources frequently refer to it only obliquely, instead referring to the fleets of the FSB or the FSB Border Guard. Its proximity to the navy and FSB suggests that its mandate is heavily influenced by their cultures and threat perceptions.

> *There are indications that the Russian government is preparing the Russian Coast Guard for an aggressive mission set in key strategic zones.*

Where the RCG does come up in Russian strategy documents, there are indications that the Russian government is preparing the RCG for an aggressive mission set in key strategic zones. The emphasis is on improving its fleets' and crews' "battle readiness" (*боеготовность*). That battle readiness is mentioned alongside strengthening the Navy's Northern Fleet, an indication that the government sees their activities as complementary. Moreover, Russia is seeking to have more operations in strategic areas where battle readiness is a prerequisite to operate. These are specified as being in the EEZ and beyond, suggesting a concentration of effort at certain chokepoints and entryways and hinting at an aggressive mission set that may even extend to the high seas (Russian Federation 2019 and 2022a). In 2025, Russia began to talk about the NSR as part of a larger project, the Transarctic Transport Corridor (*Трансарктический транспортный коридор*), which portrays the NSR as one of a group of sea lanes Russia is developing in the Arctic (Strana Rosatom 2025a and b). While the concept still awaits a full articulation in Russian strategy, current strategic documents position the RCG to, at least officially, have a role in such a broadened strategy.

Regarding shipping, the RCG's law-enforcement mandate fits into Russia's strategy to develop the NSR as a "national" sea lane to protect Russia's "transportation sovereignty" and economic security. In the Russian multi-agency approach to the NSR, the Russian navy defends the NSR, while enterprises like Rosatomflot, Sovkomflot, cargo fleets, and fisheries enable its commercial operation (Russian Federation 2019 and 2022a). It is the RCG's job to enforce

Russian law on the route, whether by deterrence or, if necessary, intervention. As described above, that law enforcement may not align with what other countries determine to be Russia's area of jurisdiction in the Arctic Ocean.

Hybrid warfare and grey zones

These strategic documents lay the groundwork for the RCG to be a component of Russian hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare seeks to advance a state's interests without getting into an open military conflict. The RCG enforces Russia's definition of the NSR by projecting state legal power to advance the goal of making it a national waterway. As argued earlier, Russia is asserting what it sees as its "sovereign rights" in the NSR. Scholars contend that the importance of coast guards has increased since the introduction of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982 (Bueger and Edmunds 2024) and that "today they wield significant policing powers in territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones—including the authority to intercept vessels, make arrests, and issue fines" (Bueger 2025). The "protection of sovereign rights" (Østhagen 2020) has become a major area of maritime state activity and a "hot-button strategic" issue (Bowers and Koh 2019). These perspectives suggest the RCG's integral role in Russia's Arctic EEZ. Russia is readying the RCG for coercion at sea in Arctic grey zones, including through hybrid war techniques – a conclusion that the analysis of Russian-language sources below will reinforce for border security audiences.

In relation to disputed maritime zones, hybrid warfare and grey zones at sea are terms that carry a range of meanings and applications. Hybrid warfare encompasses techniques intended to achieve state goals below the threshold of open armed conflict. Such activities can assert strategic interests in maritime grey zones, spaces that are contestable because of under-enforced law, inadequately articulated legal regimes, or material disparities of power between regional states. Hybrid warfare techniques can be ambiguous, deniable, and incremental; they aim to challenge an adversary to make costly decisions, such as disproportionate resource re-allocation, or to escalate the situation to protect its own interests (Bueger and Edmunds 2024). They blur military-civilian boundaries among the agencies carrying out the activities, which may not appear on the surface to be geopolitical instruments; they also confuse the character of an act of contestation and confrontation at sea, sometimes by making it unclear whether it has been perpetrated by an ostensibly civilian

agency and other times by making it difficult to attribute the causes of or intentions behind the event (Bueger 2025; Bueger and Edmunds 2024). In this context, coast guards can become agents of or counters to hybrid threats, for instance by facilitating or countering "dark shipping," high-end smuggling, and sanctions-busting activities (NAADSN 2025; Canadian Maritime Security Network 2025).

The natural and human conditions of the Russian maritime Arctic elevate both Russia's sensitivity to facing hybrid threats (which it describes itself as a victim of) and the potential for taking hybrid actions. Ice cover remains the defining environmental factor (Østhagen 2019), as does the lack of safety infrastructure and navigational data, which increase the risks in the region during emergencies (Østhagen 2019; Arctic Frontiers 2026). Expanding maritime traffic is exacerbating these factors. The Arctic is an expanding domain of commercial activity (Bowers & Koh 2019). Cargo ships and Arctic tourism are growing, right up to the North Pole, increasingly defining the region as a "global crossroads" (NAADSN 2025; Arctic Frontiers 2026). Shipping volumes and distance are key parameters affecting coast guard operations (NAADSN 2025; Østhagen 2019; Bueger 2025), and in the case of the Arctic, the former is growing and the latter is immense. The NSR has generally experienced growth in traffic annually, despite a large regression in 2022 and a marginal decrease in 2025 after a record year in 2024 (Humpert 2026).

In 2025, a key moment was the full transit of a Chinese container ship, the *Istanbul Bridge*, from Shanghai to Europe, which emphasized the NSR's growing attractiveness to some countries as a commercial route. More importantly, the Istanbul Bridge's transit signalled strategic intent – China and Russia are serious about developing the route. Whether that development will align with the marine safety standards established by the Arctic community is an open question (Brigham 2025). South Korea

THE RCG'S LEADERSHIP

Nikolai Patrushev
Chairman of the Maritime Collegium

Vladimir Kulishov
Director of the FSB Border Service

Roman Tolok
Director of the FSB Border Service's Coast Guard Department

and India have been among the others looking at building capacity for Arctic shipping that could potentially transit the NSR (Arctic Frontiers 2026).

The FSB has purposefully positioned the RCG at the ends of the NSR. Its operations are organized under Eastern and Western Arctic Regions, situated in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy and Murmansk, respectively (GR 2019b). These are where ships enter and exit the NSR: via the Barents Sea in the west, and via the Bering Strait and Chukchi Sea in the east. Along the NSR between these points, there are low levels of "undesirable" activities, such as border violations, illegal fishing or smuggling, given the region's remoteness and sparse population, in comparison to other places where the RCG operates such as the Black Sea or Pacific Ocean (Åtland 2016). This may change over time if a Central Arctic Ocean fishery were to develop in the future, but for now it is too hard for most vessels to reach Russia's northern coasts across the Arctic Ocean.

The Geopolitical Mission of the Maritime Border Guard

The RCG is preparing its crews to be ready to take coercive action in a hostile world. It does this by portraying a geopolitical role for the contemporary *моряк-пограничник*, the maritime border guard (literally, "sailor-border guard") – the terminology used to describe RCG crewmembers. Russian strategic documents talk about instilling a "maritime patriotism" (Russian Federation 2019) and the vision of the maritime border guard is very much designed to work to that end. In specialist publications, they are told that protecting the NSR's borders is one of their most consequential tasks, contributing to Russia's economic security and global status. They are to co-operate with other Russian state and business entities and with "friendly" nations – "unfriendly" ones, too, where necessary – to advance the RCG's mandate and Russia's geopolitical interests. And these publications tell them that they will have the ships to carry out their duties in icy Arctic waters.

Since 2019, the official journal of the FSB Border Service, *Granitsa Rossii* (*Граница России*, or, in English, *The Border of Russia*, hereafter GR) and the

specialist maritime journal *Morskaya Nauka i Tekhnika* (*Морская наука и техника*, or, in English, *Maritime Science and Technology*, hereafter MNT) have portrayed this image of geopolitical readiness. Statements by Russia's national leadership lay out the context and mission in which the maritime border guard is to operate, with a notable contributor being the Maritime Collegium of the Russian Federation.

The national interest and foreign threats

The pages of GR tell RCG personnel that they are advancing Russia's national interests. There, FSB Border Service head Vladimir Kulishov tells RCG readers that their work is bringing the NSR under Russian control and assisting with Arctic economic development by protecting marine resources like fish stocks. Since becoming part of the FSB Border Service, readers learn, RCG personnel have been serving a modernizing organization defending "Russia's national interests" (*национальных интересов России*) in "maritime border spaces" (*морское пограничное пространство*). Among the threats it is to protect against are espionage and foreign "provocations" (GR 2019a; 2020b; 2023b).

GR briefed RCG crews about the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation and its goals to "preserve" the country's status as a "great maritime power" and to develop its economic "potential" (GR 2022c) through the exploitation of marine resources. It is the RCG's job to protect these resources and contribute to Russia's maritime greatness. The Doctrine's highest objective, readers were told, is "guaranteeing the provision and defence of the Russian Federation's national interests in priority maritime areas of the World Ocean." Internal waters, territorial seas, the EEZs, and continental shelves are of "vital importance," with the "Arctic basin," the NSR, and Sea of Okhotsk (part of the RCG's Eastern Arctic Division's area of responsibility) named as priorities (GR 2023d). Two of the priorities are developing the NSR and, since 2025, the larger "Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor" concept (Russian Federation 2024; MNT 2025d; 2025e). The NSR is a part of the Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor, but inherent in the concept is Russia's apparent aspiration to become a facilitator of marine transport via Central Arctic Ocean sea lanes – the so-called transpolar route.

Russia's leaders tell the RCG's maritime border guards that the RCG is working in an increasingly competitive and dangerous geopolitical world. In 2025, the head of the Maritime Collegium, Nikolay Patrushev, described

Russia's borders as beset on all fronts. He assessed that in the Arctic "our opponents are striving to probe [*прощупывать*] Russia's Arctic maritime borders" (Maritime Collegium Press Service 2025). The militarization of the Arctic was "long on the geopolitical agenda" of the west (MNT 2025a). Amid these developments, RCG crews are "guarantors" of stability in the Arctic and play a role in managing mounting geopolitical instability (GR 2019e).

In terms of the objectives of the mission, Maritime Collegium head Patrushev announced that the RCG's tasks in all its operational areas were to defend Russia's maritime boundaries. Among its duties were preventing "sabotage-terrorism" (*диверсионно-террористической деятельности*), which, for instance, would include Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian critical infrastructure or shadow-fleet vessels. Such "sabotage-terrorism" likely informed Patrushev's call for the RCG to protect Russia's coast from UAVs and unmanned vessels. The other major area was countering organized crime, in particular activities such as the smuggling and trafficking of arms, narcotics, and illegal fish products (Maritime Collegium Press Service 2025).

Border security is the RCG's main task in the Arctic. In a world where, as GR told maritime border guards, adversaries were "foaming at the mouth" (*брызжут слюной*) to have access to the Russian Arctic (GR 2023e), border conditions were "dynamic" (GR 2019c; 2019d; 2019e). Foreign challenges to Russia's Arctic maritime zones were coming from the other Arctic states and included events like the 2020 UK-US-Danish-Norwegian FONOP (Freedom of Navigation Operation) in the Barents Sea close to Russia's borders, which established a NATO-related problem affecting the RCG's mandate, and "certain" Asia-Pacific countries that were challenging Russia's "sovereignty" over the NSR. These were "provocations" not only against Russia's plans for the economic development and resource exploitation of its northern territories, but against its strengthening of its defence capabilities in this "strategically important region." RCG patrols, GR said, had an "even greater significance" ("*щё более важное значение*") amidst these dynamics (GR 2019h). By 2022, the suspension of Arctic Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) co-operation made the protection of the maritime border even more acute (GR 2020g; 2022i).

Economic security is the second focus for the RCG. The coast guard is to protect and supervise the NSR and continental shelf, defending Russia's economic and "other" interests in the EEZ (GR 2020a). The RCG is to protect Russian natural resources from covetous external actors and protect the NSR

from sabotage and terrorism. The RCG is a guarantor, ensuring that economic issues related to border security ("*задачи пограничной безопасности*") are resolved in Russia's favour in the Arctic – the site of "massive resources" that Russia is "actively developing" and that other countries want to possess (GR 2020c). The Arctic is where the RCG will contribute to Russia's long-term ability to exploit resources (GR 2019h). In discussing the new Okean class vessel Anadyr, GR described its main goal as protecting the EEZ (GR 2023f).

On the NSR specifically, the RCG's border and economic security mandates intersect in its "supervisory" function. That supervisory function is part of Russia's efforts to be the world's gateway to the Arctic in an uncertain, often hostile global security environment. The route's development has been a priority for Russia (GR 2022f) and according to GR, the RCG's task is now to monitor and supervise it (GR 2019b). The NSR's borders are not peaceful: GR told RCG readers that Western states were trying to take the NSR "out of Russia's jurisdiction" (GR 2020g). The aim of these states is to hamstring Russia's strategic interests, which calls for "serious and robust defence" of the route (GR 2022f). In both the NSR and EEZ, the state tasked the RCG with "supervision" ("*контроль*" in Russian) of the NSR. That job applies to the NSR's "surface situation" and directly relates to exploiting resources (GR 2019f; 2022i).

Similarly, the RCG is tasked with defending critical infrastructure and important marine economic sectors on the Arctic continental shelf (GR 2019b; 2019e). There, the RCG's job is to protect economic infrastructure from "terrorist" threats (GR 2020a), a category that includes state-organized sabotage in the broad sense, not just ideologically inspired attacks as implied in statements about "international terrorist attacks" on "gas pipelines" – likely a reference to the attack on the Nordstream pipeline in the Baltic Sea in September 2022 (CNN 2025). The RCG would protect infrastructure by playing a key role in coordinating a multi-agency response to any attacks, part of the state-military-civil fusion that underlies Russia's northern strategies (Dalziel 2025b). FSB Border Guard special forces or spetsnaz (*спецназ*) are crucial to protecting infrastructure (GR 2020d).

In addition, GR articles reinforced the inter-agency collaboration the RCG expects from its maritime border guards. For instance, one article described an exercise simulation in which a terrorist attacked an offshore oil platform and where the RCG, other FSB Border Service departments, and

units of Rosgvardiya – a Russian militia – took part to advance multi-agency counter-terrorism training (GR 2021). Other multi-agency counter-terrorism exercises have involved more classic scenarios of "terrorists" seizing tourist ships and hostages at sea. In those exercises, vessels from civilian entities such as the Ministry of Transport, Rosatomflot, and the state oil corporation Rosneft also took part (GR 2023a). According to GR, the RCG could stand proudly among these organizations. It has its own history to draw on, carrying on time-hallowed traditions. For instance, GR reported that the RCG sailed alongside the navy as part of celebrations commemorating the 350th anniversary of Tsar Peter the Great sending scientific expeditions through the NSR to the Pacific and Kamchatka (GR 2022a; 2022b). The future, it implied, would see the RCG patrolling these waters.

> *"The Russian Coast Guard is tasked with defending critical Arctic infrastructure ... from 'terrorist threats.'*

The Russian leadership also wanted to impress upon the RCG that it was pivotal in deterring illegal activities. Maritime border guards are having a powerful deterrent effect on poaching, according to GR (2023c). FSB Border Service head Vladimir Kulishov told GR in 2023 that the RCG had effectively blocked ships with flags of convenience from entering Russia's territorial seas and EEZs (GR 2023b). The very sight of the RCG's flag – the flag of St. Andrew – immediately persuaded would-be law-breakers at sea (GR 2020f) to back off, it claimed. GR recurrently published detailed statistics of enforcement actions, in some cases quantifying the economic impact, to drive home the point that the RCG was an agency beneficial for Russia's economy. In general, GR reporting is consistent with the dual-edged security narrative promoted by President Putin, that Russia is both very exposed and very ready in the Arctic (Kaye 2025).

In the pages of GR, deterrence comes across in two ways. First, the RCG's concept of deterrence centres on "preventative intervention" (*блокирование*), one of its main methods of preventing poaching ("*профилактика*

браконьерства") of Russia's "marine bio-resources" (*морские биоресурсы*). This deterrent effect is built around its presence at sea (GR 2020f) and its strict enforcement of Russia's laws (GR 2020e) on the continental shelf. The RCG is "continually at sea," its crews carrying out their duties with responsibility, thoroughness, and pride (GR 2022h; 2023e; 2024). They are a well-cared-for team – RCG ship amenities are a frequent theme of GR articles – and operate at high performance. While these narratives focus on countering criminal actions, they are applicable to understanding the RCG's law enforcement mandate of protecting the border on the NSR, centring on a preventative, deterrent model.

Second, deterrence rests on competent weapons handling and use of force. In addition to standard crew training, as would be expected of any coast guard with a law enforcement mandate, the language of GR articles also emphasizes the geopolitical angle – the idea that the RCG is to confront enemies and stand firm in the face of NATO. RCG crews are keeping the fleet "battle ready" (GR 2023e). When NATO ships and aircraft are in the vicinity, the RCG shows a high level of competent seamanship in stressful conditions (GR 2022h). GR lauds RCG crews for their weapons handling. It has reported that maritime border guards conduct weapons training with seriousness of purpose and to good effect, showcasing the quick deployment of weapons and the crew's accuracy in destroying mock enemy targets (GR 2023e).

These two main roles do not exhaust the RCG's tasks, some of which also have geoeconomic and national security consequences related to Russia's development of the NSR as an infrastructure backbone for its Arctic statehood (*государственность*). The RCG has Search and Rescue (SAR) and social functions that are central to its overall mandate. GR describes a growing range of issues, including marine safety and "man-made emergencies," that demand a "real-time response" (GR 2023a). Similarly, the RCG supports the security of supply by carrying "socially significant cargoes" (*социально значимые грузы*) to the north's "hard-to-reach" (*труднодоступные*) places that are lacking infrastructure. These shipments and locations have a fundamental role in national security, according to Russian strategic documents (GR 2020c; Dalziel 2025a and b; Russian Federation 2021b; 2022b).

Like other Arctic countries, Russia is attempting to better connect its Arctic to the rest of the country. Unlike other Arctic countries, however, it is doing it as an authoritarian state guided by the security elites. In that sense, the

RCG is part of the effort of the preeminent Russian security elite, the FSB, to strengthen its profile in the maritime Arctic, including on the NSR. On land, the FSB will have other ways to build its power along the NSR, at ports, and in the "mineral resource centres" (Dalziel 2025a; 2025b) where Russia aspires to concentrate state and economic power to feed the NSR. This is yet one more grey zone in the Russian Arctic – that of a country where the rule of law is weak and corruption extensive. The FSB is one of the power brokers in the grey spaces of domestic Russian governance.

Fleet characteristics: Designed for Arctic grey zones

The Russian leadership's goal is for the RCG to possess coercive capabilities at the very high end of the law enforcement spectrum and reaching into the low end of a military force. Those capabilities give it the capacity to use hybrid warfare techniques in the grey zones of the Russian maritime Arctic, apparent in the portrayal of the RCG's fleet in GR and other state pronouncements. The Russian leadership and FSB Border Guard Service portray the RCG's vessels as able to serve many roles, uniquely suited to Arctic conditions, especially in the case of Ermak series ships. According to GR, the RCG's fleet is designed to maintain Russia's sovereignty over the NSR (GR 2020g).

GR articles showcase five series of major vessels carrying out RCG functions in Arctic waters and their approaches. These are the ice-capable Project 23550 Ermak, Project 22120 Purga, and Project 22100 Okean series vessels, which the RCG classifies as "border guard ships" or PSKRs (*ПСКР — пограничный сторожевой корабль,* also colloquially called *сторожевик*); some 12 Purga series and three Okean series vessels are in service, with timelines for the Ermak series highly uncertain. Their ice-capabilities vary widely, the Okhotnik vessels can handle ice less than a metre thick, while the Ermak series will reportedly be able to handle ice well over a metre thick (Rybski 2025). Backing these up are non-ice-class Project 22460 Okhotnik and the older Project 10410 Svetlyak series of "border patrol ships" or PPKs (*ППК — пограничный патрульный корабль*). These are supported by small tactical craft, or in Russian parlance, "cutters" (*катер*), for instance the KS-701 Tunets fast boat, the A25PS amphibious landing craft, and the A8 Khivus-10 hovercraft series, which can be launched from the larger ships. In addition, all the large ships except the Svetlyak series can carry or land helicopters, notably the Ka-27 (GR 2023b; GR 2020d).

Russia's leaders are paying attention to the needs of the RCG, according to GR and public statements. The publication told maritime border guards that Putin's goal, stated at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in 2023, was for Russia to build 1,000 new ships by 2035. Reporting on the forum, GR stated that a significant fleet development was required to meet Russia's geopolitical challenges, and the RCG was second in priority only after the navy in a list of agencies to get new transport, industrial, riverine, and science equipment. Fleet recapitalization was part of the effort to expand shipbuilding and develop import substitution programs that would see ships equipped with modern propulsion, electronics, and communications. Among these, there would be a "big focus" on ice-class ships for the NSR and for the Far East (GR 2023d).

Specific to the RCG, Maritime Collegium head Patrushev stated that the Russian government's priorities were fleet recapitalization, including new patrol ships and cutters, and the renovation of operational bases and the development of unmanned systems for maritime border guard operations. Suggestive both of a move to give the RCG relative (lower) priority and the RCG's increasing integration into the leadership's maritime militarization strategy is that the RCG fleet recapitalization plan was released alongside the strategy for developing the Russian Navy in summer 2025 (Marine Collegium Press Service 2025).

Similarly, FSB Border Service head Kulishov described modernizing the RCG fleet to meet its evolving set of tasks as a priority. He stated in May 2023 that Russia's aim was to build 3 to 4 full "ships" (Russian: *корабль*) and up to 20 smaller vessels (*катер*) a year. In his remarks, he emphasized building RCG at-sea assets for the Arctic, for instance the Project 22120 Ermak ice-class ships (GR 2023b). He boasted about the already high-pace of construction and delivery, claiming that the RCG had received 22 new vessels the previous year (2022). In reality, delays are frequent. The first ship of the Ermak series, the Purga, is a case in point. While it was launched in 2022, it was already still under construction in 2025 when it was heavily damaged in a Ukrainian drone attack (Rybski 2025; Staaleson 2026).

Russian leaders contend that the RCG's multi-role vessels are necessary given the geopolitical and geoeconomic situation. More new ships were coming online, GR claimed, amid geopolitical disruption, namely, foreign attempts to isolate Russia (GR 2022d). RCG personnel – and Russians more generally – learned about the efficacy and viability of Russian economic measures in

responding to sanctions, like achieving import independence. Western sanctions were mounting but import replacement figured prominently in getting the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, the second vessel in the series, into the water, it being built mostly from domestically produced equipment, including a world-leading propulsion system (GR 2020; GR 2023d). Developing the NSR and tapping continental shelf resources were other steps their leadership was taking to defend Russia – and the RCG crews were helping.

Russian leaders to communicate to RCG crews that their ships are ready for Arctic-specific geopolitical duties. The RCG was keen to emphasize that it had a modern, long-range fleet equipped for Arctic conditions and the distinct missions it had to undertake there, the Ermak and Okean series, for instance, possessing unique cutting-edge automation and navigation systems (GR 2020g; Maritime Collegium Press Service 2021a, 2021b). The launch of the Project 23550 series Purga – the "first RCG heavy tonnage vessel of ice class" – took place amid changed international circumstances that affected the protection of the NSR, GR told readers (GR 2022e). There was no room for complacency: international political and economic circumstances had worsened since the launch of the first Project 22100 Okean series vessel, for instance. GR reinforced the message that the RCG was an ever-adapting and elite maritime border service – and was wisely led.

The ships had to have several characteristics to make them viable in the Arctic. High latitudes demand *живучесть*, a Russian word whose meaning encompasses resilience, survivability, and durability (GR 2020e). They thus had to be ice-

RCG ICE-CAPABLE BORDER GUARD SHIPS
(Пограничный сторожевой корабль)

Project 23550 Ermak series
Credit: Courtesy Korabel.ru

Project 22100 Okean series
Credit: Courtesy FSB Board Guard

Project 22120 Purga series
Credit: Courtesy The Barents Observer

BORDER PATROL SHIPS
(Пограничный патрульный корабль)

Project 10410 Svetlyak series
Credit: Courtesy ERR News/Laevatehas Almaz

Project 22460 Okhotnik series
Credit: Creative Commons/Aleksandr Markin

class, operate at long ranges and have autonomous technologies. GR highlighted that Russia is increasingly looking at a year-round Arctic presence and the RCG must be "continually at sea" (GR 2020f; 2022e). FSB Border Service director Kulishov emphasized that the autonomy of new vessels in the fleet was central to a "modern," "multi-purpose" design (GR 2020c). And the ships needed to be flexible, to take on a variety of missions such as patrolling, SAR, and counter-terrorism, in deep and shallow waters (GR 2020g). A repeated theme is that the RCG's ships are best-in-class. In fact, GR claims that there are no equivalents to the capabilities of the Ermak, Purga, and Okean series ships, an exaggeration given current Norwegian Coast Guard capabilities. Russia particularly values being able to outdo the United States and these ships face competition only from those of the US Coast Guard, which cannot really compete because the US vessels are not ice capable, the GR tells readers (GR 2020g; GR 2023f).

Sufficient weaponry and special forces enablement are central to new ship designs in the hostile Arctic geopolitical environment, GR contended. RCG ships had to be armed and carry helicopters. GR touted the addition of Ka-27s to the fleet as a new capability for RCG in the Arctic aboard the Project 22460 Okhotnik series border patrol ships (GR 2020a; 2020d). Helicopters would allow FSB Border Service spetsnaz troops to conduct operations to protect offshore critical infrastructure, it was reported (GR 2020d). The RCG's upgraded fleet would make it ready to deliver a "serious and robust defence" of the NSR using vessels that are armed for "response" against an enemy (GR 2022f). New ships like the Project 22460 Okhotnik and Project 22010 Okean series are "seriously armed" and "equipped with the most modern technologies and weaponry," with armaments designed for use in rough seas. These capabilities are needed for the Okean series to conduct its mission of "providing border security in the EEZ and on the continental shelf in the Arctic and in the Far East" – that is, on the NSR (GR 2020d; 2020g; 2023f).

The Project 23550 Ermak series vessels are to embody these distinctive capabilities, but the project faces major obstacles. They are the RCG's version of the Russian Navy's "Arktika" series. Two ships are planned: the Purga, badly damaged by a Ukrainian attack in March 2026; and the Dzerzhinsky, which is currently under construction but subject to delays (Rybski 2025). They are designed for the multi-role mission that the RCG will carry out on the NSR and will significantly extend the RCG's capabilities to work on more of the route.

The FSB touts the Ermak series as being designed to conduct armed (*военный*) activities in the Arctic and Far East (Maritime Collegium Press Service 2019; Public Council of the FSB 2020). Its role would be "guarding and monitoring" Arctic waters (Maritime Collegium Press Service 2019). It is to carry out the RCG's border security, economic security, and human security roles (when it is needed for search and rescue, for instance), scientific research, and the resupply of remote locations that lack port infrastructure (Public Council of the FSB 2021). On the economic security side, the FSB claimed the ship would protect supply ships working on the continental shelf. In addition, the ships could carry supplies to remote northern communities or "low-population geostrategic territories" (*малонаселенные геостратегические территории*), a task that other agencies such as Rosatom also carry out. As the "geostrategic" terminology implies, the Russian government conceives of this as an element of national security, a part of servicing and securing the NSR as part of the infrastructure backbone (Russian Federation 2021b; Dalziel 2025b).

> *Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 badly set back the RCG's ability to work with the other Arctic countries.*

These ships are to be armed at the high end of the law enforcement spectrum and with coercive capabilities commensurate with the low end of a navy vessel, as the description of their "*военный*" roles suggests. Consistent with the unstable geopolitical environment Russian leaders say the RCG faces, Purga and Dzerzhinskiy would pack a deterrent, self-defence punch, as they are to be armed with two 30mm AK-630 cannons, four Kord heavy-calibre machine guns, and Igla and Verba surface-to-air missile systems. In addition, their ability to field FSB Border Service spetsnaz would enable them to undertake limited forms of regional power projection through hybrid warfare, such as by seizing ships or ports. Russian state sources claimed that up to 50 spetsnaz troops could be housed onboard an Ermak series vessel, in addition to its 60-person crew, and could conduct their operations via a shipborne helicopter and Project 03160 Raptor fast boats, supported by UAVs (Public Council of

the FSB 2021). These would enable the RCG to conduct or contribute to what Russia might call high-end law enforcement missions – and what NATO allies might see as hybrid warfare operations.

International co-operation on the approaches to the NSR

If they are to do their work successfully, maritime border guards must co-operate internationally – even when that co-operation entails difficult work with adversarial states. Russian strategic documents identify the advancement of international co-operation as critical to the success of the RCG's mission. The Maritime Doctrine sets "expanding mutually beneficial international co-operation" in the maritime Arctic as one of its goals (Russian Federation 2022a). GR emphasizes the geopolitical and international security underpinnings of this objective by specifically stating that the RCG has a role in creating stability in the Arctic as a whole.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 badly set back the RCG's ability to work with the other Arctic countries. That invasion resulted in the suspension of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum's (ACGF) engagement with Russia, the ACGF being the primary such regional forum. GR then asserted that Russia could rely on its own resources, for instance by pushing ahead with a training exercise originally planned for the ACGF. Russia showcased its own accountability, stepping up when its alleged partners let it down, according to GR. And Russia stated that it was ready to co-operate with "friendly" countries (GR 2023a).

ACGF co-operation had been vigorous right up to the eve of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine (NAADSN 2025). But bilateral communication was particularly valuable, according to GR. Norway, because it shares a maritime border with Russia in the Barents Sea and because the fisheries there are important for both countries, was the focus of the most attention. Co-operation with Norway had delivered dividends for Russia: for example, the at-sea exchange of inspectors with Norway had raised "the quality" of regional fisheries enforcement, upping the professional level of maritime border guards as they learned about best practices in dealing with civilian fleets. As a result, Norwegian and Russian maritime authorities had been developing a common expertise in understanding the "necessity and importance of joint border co-operation" in "bio-resources" and safe seafaring (*мореплавания*) in the Barents Sea (GR 2019g; 2022g).

After February 2022, it became even more important for Russia's leadership to communicate to the RCG that bilateral imperatives raised the profile of co-operation with Norway, for practical reasons like protecting fish stocks and to counter the idea that Russia was isolated internationally. Norwegian officials, GR reported, were visiting their Russian counterparts near the (land) border to discuss the bilateral supervision of fish stocks. GR emphasized that Norwegian statements about the necessity of co-operation on bio-resource management and the ongoing sharing of information and countering of illegal fishing between the two sides was a channel of "constructive dialogue" (GR 2022e).

The loss of the ACGF forum was nonetheless a blow to the RCG and its political masters. Few other coast guards can operate comprehensively in Arctic conditions, so Russia does not have many candidates to replace its Arctic partners. FSB Border Service Director Kulishov was at pains to point out that information exchange was ongoing in the North Pacific with the US, South Korea, and Japan (GR 2023b). He directly connected the deterioration in the state of ACGF co-operation and Russia's co-operation with China in the maritime Arctic, positioning China as an alternative partner to the ACGF (GR 2023b).

> *Co-operation with China has been the signature development for the Russian Coast Guard since 2022.*

In fact, co-operation with China has been the signature development for the RCG abroad since 2022. As Kulishov put it, China-Russia collaboration in the Arctic was a microcosm of the strengthening relationship between the two countries and "a new page" in bilateral border work, driven in part by the economic rationale that trade along the NSR was growing (GR 2023a). GR thereby gave maritime border guards the sense that they were part of larger currents in Russia's foreign relations. GR told its readers that co-operation with China's coast guard would focus on law enforcement (*в правоохранительной сфере*) (GR 2023b) and that co-operation with China was not just beneficial

for the RCG in carrying out its mandate, but was an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its maritime leadership; from Russia, China was learning about the successful FSB Border Service multi-departmental and multi-agency approach to maritime security. GR portrayed the Russian service as the more established of the two, and thus an opportunity for the Chinese Coast Guard to learn (GR 2023a).

When it comes to hybrid warfare at sea and contesting grey maritime zones, the RCG's developing relationship with its counterpart in the People's Republic of China warrants monitoring. China's Coast Guard is a frontrunner in adapting coercive hybrid warfare techniques to assert claims and contest maritime jurisdiction in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait. According to Bueger and Edmunds (2024), China's activities to create grey zones in these waters "stand out by their scope, innovativeness and scale." These activities "have enabled an expansion and consolidation of its regional maritime presence" by deploying "maritime security agencies and fishing fleets to press home its territorial claims." These actions have "tested the limits of international law. . . and worked to delegitimize and constrain the actions of neighboring states." In addition to its radical step of building islands in the South China Sea, Bueger and Edmunds point to China's use of civilian agencies and the "militarization" of the Chinese Coast Guard. Through Russia's deepening co-operation with China, the RCG will have the opportunity to learn first-hand from its Chinese counterpart about the latest methods for waging hybrid warfare and apply them to the NSR.

The conditions of the Arctic Ocean off northern Russia are much different from those in the waters off China: they are climatically more inhospitable, less frequently travelled, and more distant from major population centres. But their value in Russia's strategic calculations is high. Events over the past few years suggest that Russia is an active hybrid warrior at sea. Russian suspects are regularly implicated in episodes of suspected sabotage of underwater communications and energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, such as the damage to the Baltic Connector gas pipeline and nearby fibre optic cables in October 2023 or the damage to electricity and fibre-optic cables in December 2024, and in the seas off Norway, like the damage to the fibre-optic line connecting Svalbard to the Norwegian mainland in January 2022. This hybrid warfare has yet to extend to clashes over Arctic waters Russia claims as its own, something that China does undertake, as was the case with the October 2025 ramming of

a Philippine fisheries patrol vessel by a Chinese Coast Guard ship in the South China Sea. In the event that Russia chooses to take such actions, the RCG will almost certainly be one of the tools available for it to do so. And the increase in traffic in Arctic sea lanes will create the conditions for such situations to become more likely.

Implications and conclusion: The RCG in the Russian Arctic grey zone

The Russian Coast Guard is part of Russia's attempt to create a multi-layered system to advance its key geopolitical objectives of asserting national jurisdiction in the Arctic Ocean. Its layer is high-end law enforcement and low-end navy roles – capabilities that enable it to operate in grey zone and hybrid warfare situations. Specifically, the RCG will help safeguard the approaches to the NSR, providing a non-military means of managing confrontation at both the North Atlantic and the North Pacific ends of the route – where Russia meets European and North American NATO. Finally, the RCG's Arctic activities make the FSB one of the relevant players in the region, advancing Russia's most powerful security agency in a region of top strategic priority to Moscow - the Arctic.

First, the RCG's areas of operations will concentrate in the Barents Sea in the west and the seas on either side of the Bering Strait in the east – that is, where the Russian maritime world abuts European NATO countries at one end, and the United States and China at the other. Even when the more capable Ermak ships are operational, the ice conditions of the vast extent of the NSR between the Gulf of Ob and the Bering Strait, not to mention those of the Central Arctic Ocean, will limit the RCG's presence. The nuclear icebreakers of Rosatomflot and the Russian navy's submarines will be responsible for most of the implementation of Russia's grand strategy there.

It is at the endpoints of the NSR where the RCG is likely to have most of its interaction with Canada, the US, and the rest of NATO. The RCG is equipped to contribute as one layer of security in these areas. Here the RCG can signal Russia's intentions and handle potential confrontations over jurisdiction

with other states without using the military, making it less likely to lead to an unplanned escalation. At the entry points to the NSR, this can help Moscow manage tensions while, if necessary, still aggressively asserting its jurisdiction, much as China has used its Coast Guard in contested waters of the western Pacific. Both of these are areas where Canada, the United States, Norway, and their European and North Pacific allies will have to monitor the activities of RCG vessels to deter hybrid and grey zone activities.

Second, because the RCG fleet has high-end law enforcement capabilities that position it on the low-end of the military capabilities of a navy vessel, it has both flexibility and ambiguity in the activities it might pursue. In particular, because the RCG's Arctic fleet, especially the Project 23550 Ermak ships, can carry and support spetsnaz troops, it is in a position to undertake a range of hybrid activities. Those activities can take the form of acting against shipping on the NSR or coastal operations, relevant to port security and territorial integrity in the North American and European Arctics. The FSB is suspected of conducting Russian hybrid warfare in Europe, including on the land borders of Finland and Poland. Moreover, its co-operation with China's Coast Guard suggests the directions the RCG might take in the future in the Arctic; RCG personnel are learning from their Chinese counterparts about their operations in the grey zone in the South China Sea, for instance – operations that aim to advance China's claims there that are outside of international law.

Finally, the RCG is a major presence for the FSB in Russia's Arctic in an environment that is not just geopolitically competitive, but where there is interdepartmental rivalry in the quest for state resources. The RCG is the FSB's main tool by which it projects its power in the waters of the NSR, whether that be by monitoring foreign ships or keeping an eye on other Russian government agencies and business enterprises. Through the RCG, the FSB adds maritime surveillance and response capabilities. It also gives Russia another actor skilled in hybrid warfare in other theatres. Canada, the United States, and NATO-ally Norway should factor these facts into their security calculations. These are the regions where the Russian Coast Guard will help create Russia's grey zone in the Arctic. MLI

About the author

Alexander Dalziel is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute with over 20 years of experience in Canada's national security community. Previously, he held positions with the Privy Council Office, Canada School of Public Service, Department of National Defence, and Canada Border Services Agency. During that time, he worked across multiple operational and strategic domains. Dalziel holds bachelor's and master's degrees in history from Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as certificates in Russia and Baltic Area Studies from the University of Eastern Finland and in European Studies from the University of Bonn. MLI

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323 Chapel Street, Suite 300,
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7Z2
613-482-8327
info@macdonaldlaurier.ca

macdonaldlaurier.ca